



Strategic Insights: The U.S. Foray Into The Levant

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The Levant is caught up in a web of political, social, and economic problems that seem to be the work of the hidden hand of the devil. The U.S. Air Force, and those of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Jordan are actively bombing positions of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or ISIS by substituting “Syria” for “Levant”)—an immediate and critical component of the Barack Obama administration’s strategy to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”¹ A corollary to the air campaign is to arm the Kurdish security forces, arm and train the Syrian Free Army, retrain units of the Iraqi Army, and stand up an Iraqi national guard unit made up of Iraqi Sunni elements—all to combat ISIL on the ground. The other elements of the strategy involve using U.S. counterterrorism capabilities, including intelligence, to prevent ISIL attacks, and to provide humanitarian assistance to affected civilians who have been the victims of ISIL terror.

The high profile of U.S. military engagement in the Levant will eventually come to an end. At that time, and as is customary, the United States will declare victory and attempt to exit gracefully, while pronouncing its enduring commitment and support to our regional allies.

As the United States and its Arab and Western allies rejoice in their victory over ISIL, knowledgeable Arab observers are likely to argue that the Levant’s merry-go-round has just dropped off ISIL and will now await new “riders” that are sure to appear. After all, the number of radical Islamic groups has been on the rise in the past few years, and unless the deeper issues that lie beneath the phenomenon of religious extremism and fanaticism are addressed, the trend is likely to continue.

Granted, most of these issues are well known and generations to come will need to cope with such issues. In part, the Arab Spring that erupted 4 years ago was a populist call to replace autocratic political regimes, and to introduce social and economic reforms as means to a better future for the Arab people. The hopes of the Arab Spring have, by and large, faltered, and radical Islamic ideologues have burst out on the scene with violent vengefulness.

But the most critical of these issues today is the question of identity. Without assigning blame, the fact is that outsiders have defined both the geography and demography of the modern Middle East, especially the Levant. The inhabitants of the Arab world were organized into states following the demise of the Ottoman Empire with little or no regard to their tribal, ethnic, or sectarian affiliations—and with no regard to their wishes. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, it became fashionable to speak of Sunnis, Shi'a, Kurds, Christians, Turkoman, and so on.

The one political identity that once was a common denominator that made little or no distinction between religious sects, tribal or ethnic differences, namely "Arab nationalism," was discarded following the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel, and replaced with local nationalism "wataniyyah" as a means to thwart the rise of one unified Arab nation that could threaten Western interests in the region.

In the current environment in the region, Arabism defined broadly to mean the national identity of the inhabitants of the Arab world, regardless of religious, tribal or ethnic affiliations, who share a common language and history, but also a destiny that binds them together, is the only viable alternative to religious extremism that views identity through a narrow sectarian prism. It is this secular and broad meaning of Arabism that led Shimon Peres, the former president of Israel, to suggest that Israel could one day join the Arab League.

The frequent exhortations that extremist Muslims are distorting the true and peaceful message of Islam are not likely to dissuade those who chose the radical path and who believe in the interpretations of Islamic texts of salafi religious scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya. The attempt to get conservative and radical Muslims to accept a more liberal and tolerant form of Islam is a futile exercise of competing arguments that have no higher referent to adjudicate between them.

The Obama administration should seriously consider the possibility of establishing a U.S. Informational and Cultural Services Agency (USICSA) somewhat similar to the now defunct U.S.

Information Agency. Unlike the latter whose main mission was to explain America's foreign policy to the rest of the world and to promote American values and culture during the Cold War years, USICSA additionally would become the principal agency for strategic communication to deal with anti-terrorism programs (vice counterterrorism, which is a reference to military actions against terrorists) designed to promote a culture of tolerance and diversity. It should be professionally staffed and be both a "joint" and "coalition" agency. Members of the military, State Department, intelligence agencies, and others with relevant expertise such as public affairs, public diplomacy, strategic communication, and the like, could be assigned to the agency for a tour of duty. USICSA should heavily engage coalition partners who understand best their and the region's publics and how best to address them. Above all, the effort should be guided by a strategic communication doctrine, by continually planning and adjusting informational and cultural strategies, and to execute them as war plans with operations and tactics that are derived from and in support of each strategy. It should be an effort distinct from the existing ad hoc, haphazard, disparate, and competing programs aimed at "changing hearts and minds" on which various departments, agencies and centers of the U.S. Government waste taxpayers' dollars.

When the United States and its allies pursue a policy grounded in the realities of the Levant, perhaps then the merry go-round could be replaced with a forward moving conveyance.

ENDNOTE

1. Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," The White House, Washington, DC, September 10, 2014

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